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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted of the relatively small group of community college presidents who have been in their current position for 10 years or longer. The study focused on the fit of the president to the institution, the presidents' vision, the planning process, and style issues such as leadership, delegation, consensus building, and decision making. Study findings, based on profiles developed of specific college presidents who have successfully lead their institutions for a long period, included the following: (1) during the presidential selection process, the search committee and the board of trustees had very specific ideas of what they wanted in a president, and afterwards showed a great commitment to helping the president succeed; (2) the long-term presidents tended to have a vision of their institution based on deep knowledge of its traditions and dreams, and a sense of what it can accomplish; (3) the presidents were constantly promoting new ways to better achieve the mission of the institution and often involved in long-term or strategic planning; (4) the presidents stressed how much responsibility they delegated for day-to-day activities and took pride in others' accomplishments; (5) the presidents were innovative and not bound to the status quo; (6) the presidents possessed an entrepreneurial spirit and encouraged it in others; (7) the presidents worked closely with board chairs; and (8) decisions were made at the appropriate level. (AC)

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"How Long Term Presidents Lead"

A Summary of Information Presented

by Joseph C. Donnelly, Jr.

at the Leadership 2000 Conference

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A Look At Some Long Term Presidents

Joseph C. Donnelly, Jr.

July 19, 1993

For over twenty years, I have been working for or with educational institutions in a variety of ways, as a member of senior management, a trustee (including president of the board of an independent school), and a consultant looking at issues of leadership, planning, and governance. In each of these roles I have seen instances where short tenure of leaders has compromised the institution's ability to reach its goals. What is the role of leadership in allowing an institution to move forward and achieve its objectives?

Given the difficulties and complexities of leadership roles, most of the initiatives undertaken or advanced by presidents have multi-year horizons. Have we made these jobs increasingly impossible for many people to handle comfortably over a period of time? The percentage of presidents who stay at an institution 10 years or longer has decreased from 40% to 20% over the last 60 years (Kerr and Gade, 1986). In recent years the average tenure of a college president has remained at a rather low 6.8 years (Chronicle of Higher Education, Mooney, 1992). During the last few years there have been numerous articles written about problems of the college presidency. In a course at the Harvard Graduate School of Education on the presidency conducted last year by two former college presidents now on the faculty, David Breneman and Arthur Levine, much of the literature and many of the guest speakers focused on the difficulties of being a college president today, and the turnover of presidents. Yet we know that there are some people in presidencies who manage to thrive and prosper. With all the discussion about turnover and problem presidencies, what can we learn about successful long-term presidents? The research presented here focuses on the exceptions - presidents who have been on the job a long time.

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By virtue of the fact that only 20% of the presidents today stay in their position for 10 years or longer indicates that they are exceptions. What are the personal characteristics of these presidents?

Since starting this research, I have been impressed by how much the presidents I have interviewed love their jobs, fifteen plus years since their inauguration, and that they are constantly looking for new ways to improve their institutions. What is it about them and their leadership that makes them want to continue? How have they maintained relationships through the years with their faculty, administration, and trustees? What is their role in the planning process and promoting the college's mission? How have the perceptions of their leadership affected their success and longevity in office? How do they differ from presidents who are not so successful, or who do not hold their jobs for a long time?

While there is much literature on unsuccessful presidents (Cohen and March, 1974) (Fisher, 1984) and some on effective presidents (Birnbaum, 1992) (Fisher, Tack, and Wheeler, 1988), there is little on successful long-term presidents.

The research so far seems to be finding that long-term presidents are perceived as having many of the qualities of effective leaders: i.e. vision, energy, the ability to delegate, the ability to make decisions. One purpose of this research is to look more deeply to see if there are any variables, whether clear or more subtle, that distinguish successful long-term presidents from other successful leaders.

I hope that this research may put a positive light on the presidency by learning more about this small minority of presidents who are successful over a long period of time. Perhaps by looking at the activities of a few successful presidents, other presidents may be able to discern opportunity.

This paper cites examples from specific profiles of college presidents from my research who have been able to lead their institutions successfully over a long period. What factors enabled these long-term activist presidents to maintain their effectiveness over time? What actions have these presidents or institutions taken to increase the president's productive tenures. In looking at the specifics, we will consider the following:

The fit of the president to the institution

The president's vision

The planning process

Leadership, delegation, consensus, decision-making

These items, while separate, are closely linked together, in fact are interwoven in the successful presidents in my research.

The Fit of the President to the Institution:

Search committees and trustees usually try to find a suitable candidate who can articulate how the college can achieve the institution's goals and direction (McLaughlin and Riesman 1990). If the institution has not developed implicitly stated goals, the search committee may look for an individual who can articulate a mission consistent with its general ideas of institutional direction, or who has the personal characteristics and a style that they feel will further the image of the college. The new president may add personal objectives and insight to those of the trustees and faculty so that future goals and objectives of the institution reflect substantial input from the new president. The president's vision is thus reflected in the institution's updated plans, and the relationship between the president and the institution should be closer (Birnbaum, 1992 p.86). Of course sometimes this never happens. Within three to five years, in many situations, the relationship between

president and institution has changed or never jelled. Faculty and trustees become disenchanted and the president decides it is time to find another position. It may be that with some of the short-term presidents the search process was not adequate. It may be that the fit was not right.

One of the things I have done with the presidents I am studying is to meet with individuals who were on the search committee. I have tried to learn what the institution wanted, and why they decided on this particular individual. At one community college, the current president succeeded the founding president. From the chairman of the search committee and from some long-term faculty members, I learned that the founding president was very loved, but considered a father figure to many people on the campus, especially the women. At the time of the search, a new campus had been constructed. The search committee wanted a person who could run it, motivate the faculty and staff, and tie the college to the community. The person they hired was a successful community college president elsewhere. Of the potential candidates, he was favored especially by the staff members of the search committee for what they felt he could do for their college. The college was ready for a change in leadership, the new president was ready to provide it. One of the first changes he made was to get individual department chairs and administrators more involved in the budgeting process and make them accountable for their actions. Now some fifteen plus years later, several people who have been at this college for a long time have told me, "We never would have believed that we would come this far."

At another college, which also had had a previous long-term president, the search committee was looking for an individual who could put new life into the college. In conversation with a member of the search committee, I asked what skills they were seeking. He spoke from memory. They wanted to strengthen the faculty, update and enhance the physical plant, and greatly

increase their endowment. The person they chose had been a dean at the college, and was chairman of their long-range planning committee. He was and continues to be a vibrant and vital force on this campus.

In both of these situations, and in others with which I am familiar where the president has succeeded, there was a great commitment from the search committee and the board of trustees to help the president succeed. The chairman or a strong member of the search committee frequently becomes the next chairman of the board of trustees. The president and the chairman of the board define their respective roles and work as a team.

The board of trustees supports the president and is a great advocate.

The President's Vision:

Much has been written about presidents and vision. Some authors have said it is important, some have said it is not that relevant. Among those presidents with whom I have spoken, they seem to have a tremendous vision of their institution. In interviews with faculty and administrators, the vision of the president has frequently been mentioned. It is based on a deep knowledge of the institution, its traditions and its dreams. These presidents are sensitive to the dreams of others, and tend to facilitate appropriate dreaming among faculty members. By dreaming, I don't mean pie-in-the-sky, but rather investigating how the institution can be thinking creatively about ways to solve problems, to achieve goals, or to do better and more effectively that which they have been doing.

For example, one president felt that his college's beautiful campus on the shore of a lake was not able to adequately address the significant needs of a substantial and growing minority population in a nearby city. The result was that the college

took as a major objective the establishment of a second campus in the heart of the city. A hazard of this new campus was that the college might have two different populations: one majority campus and one minority. The president believed strongly that that would not achieve the institution's objectives. He worked with the leaders of some of the college's flagship programs and had them move some of these strong programs to the new campus.

Another president is looking at new ways to improve teaching, especially among members of the teaching staff who heretofore on their campus have been considered average. While this was initially a priority of the president, he knew it had to become a priority of the faculty, for only if they embraced the concept could it happen. The college has recently completed an extensive strategic plan. In looking at their academic program, the faculty realized that they needed to be able to assess how they were achieving their objectives. Faculty task forces are currently trying to determine how they achieve their objectives, one of which includes improved teaching.

These two presidents each possess a strong vision of their institution and what it can accomplish. While not without controversy, it is a vision that excites and mobilizes many of the constituents.

Three presidents when appointed were given the charge to reposition their institutions: two universities, one a four-year college. In each of these cases the president had very strong board support and mixed faculty support. The three chose to proceed in a similar fashion. They hired new and rewarded existing faculty members who shared the new vision. They let existing faculty members who chose to, continue with business as usual. In two of the situations, the college increased in selectivity and visibility. As time went on, more of the status-quo faculty joined the bandwagon. At the third, the jury is still out.

The Planning Process:

The long-term presidents with whom I have spoken are constantly promoting new ways to achieve better the mission of the institution. To carry this out, the institution becomes involved in long-range or strategic planning.

Derek Bok, president of Harvard for 20 years, stated:

> "The president is almost the only person who sees the institution as a whole. The president takes a strategic view and tries to educate the campus. If the president doesn't stay long enough, the institution can't develop its plans" (Bok 1993).

Faculty members frequently independently are pushing for their own department. Through a good planning process, the faculty may become more aware of issues and opportunities of the college and how the various pieces fit together. Whereas at some colleges faculty members have a stronger tie to their discipline than to the institution, a strong planning process can help develop a more cohesive institution. A president of a private women's college emphasized that the planning process allowed the faculty the opportunity to "think creatively about what they are doing."

One of the institutions I have been studying has a very fine-tuned planning structure. They have a long-term history of developing a plan, working out the strategies and plans for implementation, and moving forward.

Leadership, Delegation, Consensus Building, Decision Making:

The presidents are aware of the complexities and enormity of their job. Consequently, the one's with whom I have spoken have stressed how much they delegate. They emphasize that they don't have the time to be involved in day to day activities. They encourage others to implement and own programs. The president refers to the success of the programs organized by others.

A related but similar thread is the pride that these president's share in a host of college activities, even those which were other's ideas. One interesting observation I have seen in a few cases, and also reported to me by key staff people, is that although the president delegates the president sometimes becomes impatient, and may alter the game plan. At one college, a specific task was assigned to one individual. When it was not accomplished quickly, it was assigned to another, and then to a third. Interestingly, the implementation by the third included some input from the first two, and did not seem to cause hard feelings among them. Rather they used it as an example of the president's wanting to have a task implemented.

These presidents are innovative, not bound to continuing the status-quo. Faculty members at various institutions have stated to me that the president is ahead of them in trying to move the campus forward. Some faculty members have complained to me that their president is too authoritarian and trying to move the institution in ways that they feel are not appropriate. These same faculty members when asked what they would do if they were president have responded they would do "exactly what the president is doing", but perhaps change or modify the process.

These presidents seem to possess an entrepreneurial spirit and encourage the same in their faculty and staff. Those faculty members who share the entrepreneurial spirit complement the president on the confidence he has in them and the support he gives them in developing new programs. They emphasize that he makes them accountable for what they propose, but that he encourages them to move forward.

The long-term presidents say they are and seem to be happy doing the job - enjoy the task being done. Some of the shorter term presidents with whom I have spoken, on the other hand, seemed worn out. Two mentioned to me they had to spend too much of their time on fund raising, or on current issues, rather than

having the college move towards its long-range goals. Some of the long-term presidents have professed not to like fund raising either, although I would say they have learned how to be good at it. Instead of focusing on the fact that they are fund raising, they are focused on what it is that they are trying to accomplish and why it is important. In a discussion with the chief lieutenant of a president, the subject of fund raising came up. I referred to the negotiation of a major gift, that may be the largest gift the college has ever received. I was told that the president's role was not in the fore-front. He was strategically talking with his trustee who had the knowledge and ability to convince the donor that the gift made sense. To me this was an example of the president thinking clearly of what the institution needed and how to achieve it, putting his own ego aside.

More than one president has told me how important it is to keep focused on long-term objectives. They need to help make and implement strategic decisions. They don't get bogged down in details others can accomplish. As Henry Rosovsky (1993) has stated, presidents who are "micro-managers are doomed."

The successful presidents with whom I have spoken work closely with the board chair. The board supports the president. In talking with board members, I have heard trustees speak highly of the president and the strong working relationship between the president and the board chair. The presidents with whom I have spoken have been willing to share with me their confidential evaluations. In one case, the trustee who chaired the evaluation committee told me I should obtain a copy, and he would be willing to provide it. In a subsequent conversation with the president I mentioned a favorable quote made by a prominent individual in that state's higher education department included in the evaluation which the trustee proudly told me. The president gladly offered me a copy of the evaluation.

The president and the board chair prepare the board agenda.

They don't bring to the board what doesn't need to come before the board. How the president interacts with board members seems to vary by individuals and subject. At various college trustee meetings which I have attended, I have been intrigued with how different the role of the president is. At one institution, which is a public college, the chair introduces the topic, the president discusses it, and if appropriate calls on the appropriate faculty or staff person to elaborate, there is discussion, the president summarizes and the chair thanks. At another, the chairman of the trustees runs the meeting. The president discusses his agenda, which is institution-wide. Then each committee chair and appropriate staff provide information for their area, followed by discussion. Here the president provides an overview, may be asked specific questions about a topic, but in general, is used as a resource. The latter institution has a more developed trustee committee system and a more intensive planning process than does the former.

The presidents try to ascertain that all decisions are made at an appropriate level. The staff members know what they need to discuss with the president. At one college, some faculty and staff said to me "I have so much on my plate, I wish I knew what the president wanted me to do first." The president said to me, "I have a competent staff that should be able to figure out what the priorities are." The chief staff officer said to me, "Anyone who knows the president well knows what the agenda is." My observation is that all three of these comments are true.

Summary:

In summary, I will review some factors which my research suggests have enabled some long-term activist presidents to maintain their effectiveness over time. The first has to do with the president's knowledge of and vision for the institution. For the president to be a successful leader, the president must have a substantial number of followers within the institution. The president's articulation of the vision of the college should be

one that invites allegiance from the various college constituencies, one that the faculty and staff wish to achieve. It may be a vision that the president has developed based on ideas and thoughts of others on campus, it may be the president's own, but it must be one that the followers embrace. According to John Kotter (1988), "Good" leadership moves people in a direction that is genuinely in their real long-term interest. The president needs to think of where the institution is heading, and try to keep the college heading in that direction.

Trustees and presidents have stressed to me the importance of the relationship between the president and the board. A cohesive board of trustees, no matter how diverse, is important for a president. The president keeps the board involved in policy issues and informed about goings on at the institution. The board supports the president once decisions have been debated and made.

It is easy for presidents to get caught up in day-to-day activities. The long-term presidents with whom I have spoken try to delegate as much as possible, and rely heavily on their staffs. I agree with Robert Birnbaum's statement that presidents who succeed over time continually cultivate faculty support, maintain positive relationships with their faculty, and maintain the enthusiasm and high institutional concerns of "new" presidents (Birnbaum, 1992). They remain remarkably vibrant over time.

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